BECOME LIKE CHILDREN

October 16, 1988

11:00 a.m. Worship Service

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Isaiah 11:6-9
Mark 10:13-16

"...whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." -Mark 10:15 (RSV)

Last Sunday babies were baptized in this church. If you were here you may recall that all six of them participated in their baptism - quite vocally. It was as noisy and chaotic a baptism as I've ever seen. Dr. Boyle was doing the honors. Now I have a confession to make. I dropped into the pre-baptism parents' conference to say hello to the parents and while I was there I told them not to be too anxious if their children cried during baptism; that, in fact, an elderly Scottish woman in the Highland Church where I served once told me that when a baby cries during baptism it's the devil being driven out and that, indeed, a crying baby was some indication of an effective baptism. Without pondering the theology of that, I have always treasured the story and have told it many times. Well, last Sunday I told it and then I told the parents that I would miss presiding, that Dr. Boyle would be presiding, and that perhaps they would do whatever they could to convince their infants to put up a bit of a fuss, cry a little - just to make sure John got the full experience and earned his pay...

And then I sat in the back pew for the worship service. It was great. Those of you in the back know that you really can't see much of what happens on the chancel. The visual beauty of the sacrament is pretty much lost for back benchers. But when those babies cried, one after another (it seemed to me that they each started to cry as soon as John Boyle touched them) something wonderful happened in the back of the Sanctuary. People smiled, looked at each other and nodded, even laughed out loud. The sound of children instantly and powerfully affirmed something about humanity and God that was immediately transforming and altogether good.

There are several incidents in the New Testament involving Jesus and children. This one is the strongest. People were bringing their children to Jesus... Isn't that lovely? No explanation as to why, they just brought their children so that he could touch them. Parents know what that's about. You want your children to be touched by people who are important. "This is my son - my daughter." In any event, the disciples -

well-meaning, of course - were turning them away. It had been busy and intense. Jesus in a sense was under siege from the Pharisees who were firing very difficult questions at him, the most recent about divorce and remarriage. He was exhausted. He needed a little peace and quiet. After all, the children didn't seem like a very high priority. So the disciples were turning them away - "Not now - he's tired - come back later..." And when Jesus became aware of what was happening, he was indignant. That's when he said, "Let the children come..." - and then to the disciples he said "unless you become like children you won't enter the kingdom of God."

It's a very human moment in the Gospel narrative, not unlike that wonderful moment in worship last Sunday. The passage was quite influential in the early church's attitude toward children and, by extension, the whole of Western civilization. Not all children were valued in that Roman world. It was still common for unwanted children simply to be abandoned in the streets. One of the earliest marks of the Christian ethos was the valuing of all children.

What was it about the children that Jesus appreciated and held up as a model of the life of God's kingdom? One of the dangers here is that we are inclined to sentimentalize the story. It helps to differentiate between childlikeness and childishness - the immaturity, the almost total self-absorption, the inability to differentiate between what is important and what is not important, the almost limitless capacity for making messes and noise. Jesus was not glamorizing childishness. "When I became an adult I put away childish things," St. Paul said in his soliloquy on the meaning of mature love.

Jesus was talking about the essence of a child - childlikeness. And he was saying something that our best psychology now knows. Namely that there is something very basic to our own humanity, to our own maturity and wholeness as adults which has to do with the child we once were - or the child who is still part of who we are. Growing and maturing, after all, is a process that goes on as long as we live. We are never done with it. We are always becoming, growing, reaching, deepening. And the process is a fluid process, not a series of precise stages. Adolescence is not absolutely contained between the ages of twelve and seventeen. We are all the ages we ever were, in a sense. In the middle of the process I can be - when I emerge out of the tunnel into the bright sun and green grass of Wrigley Field - the little boy thrilled to be at a major league game. You have been on occasion the adolescent in love, the angry, impatient young man or woman who wants things to be different in the country or company.

Jesus was teaching that there is a child in us which should be valued, nurtured and expressed. I found a helpful suggestion in a book about religion and art by Madeleine L'Engle. She cites a study of creativity which revealed that "In our society, at the age of five, ninety percent of the population measures 'high creativity.' By the age of seven the figure has dropped to ten percent. And the percentage of adults with high creativity is only two percent!" [Finley Eversole, The Politics of Creativity, in Madeleine L'Engle, Walking on Water, Reflections on Faith and Art, p. 72]

What happens to us? Jesus seemed to be saying that adults lose something of the spiritual potential they once had. Is it possible that there is a relationship between the two; that in addition to losing our creativity we lose something of our spirituality at the same time? And that the two - creativity and spirituality - are related? It's an intriguing possibility.

Children are creative, fascinated with the wrappings of the box instead of the "creative toy" inside; utterly captivated by the infinite possibilities of three spoons and a sauce pan.

Children are susceptible to and capable of wonder. An infant's eye is caught by every movement. Every new sight and sound is a glorious gift.

Children are curious, unafraid to ask, undaunted by the unknown and absolutely honest. While the mature adults are saying all the expected and appropriate things, a child points out that the Emperor has nothing on, in Hans Christian Andersen's famous story. A mother told me that she brought her four year old to church and when I appeared in the pulpit he asked in a stage whisper heard for several pews on all sides, "Is that God?" "No," his mother explained, "that's Mr. Buchanan." The four year old thought a while and tried again. "Well, where's God?" Desperate to end the conversation, she said, "God didn't come to church this morning."

Children, I believe, think profoundly, about ultimate things... Ontologically is the fancy way of saying it. "Why is there a world? What was there before there was a world? Who made God?" One of this year's best sellers is A Brief History of Time by Stephen Hawking, a British mathematician who is one of the half dozen smartest people alive. There is a lot about the book that I couldn't understand, but the understandable part was written with a child-like simplicity and integrity that was almost heartbreaking. This incredibly brilliant man somehow still thinks with the simple integrity of a child.

And children can understand mythic truth. Bruno Bettleheim, in his wonderful study, The Uses of Enchantment, explores that thesis. Children understand the meaning of Jack and the Bean Stalk, and Little Red Riding Hood, and Snow White. They really don't need to be told that these are just stories. Bettleheim contends that they are quite capable of handling even the violence in traditional fairy tales and of differentiating between what is real and what is not. We're not so sure that they can do that with the uninterrupted assault on their psyches of American commercial television which knows no limits to its vulgarity and violence.

Well, what happens to all of that - that creativity, wonder, inquisitiveness, honesty and discernment? What happens to the child in us? "All children are artists," Madeleine L'Engle contends... "they start out without self-consciousness... they don't worry that they may not be good... they know intuitively that it is folly to make comparisons, and they go ahead and say what they want to say." [p. 51]

Somehow, in the process of becoming wise and mature we forget that. Slowly but surely, the process of growing moves away from that creativity which is so very close to spirituality.

Without really intending to we teach them that truth and reality will be found in mathematics and science, while art and music are secondary, electives even. When there is a budget squeeze, art and music are the first to go.

Without really meaning to, we teach them to compare and measure everything they do and say so that they conclude that they can't draw or sing or dance or think as well as their peers and so they simply don't try.

And without really meaning to, we discourage that lovely sense of wonder - that ability to respond with laughter, ecstasy, passion, tears - to the incredible world around them. Without really meaning to, we teach them that it is better to be blase, unaffected, untouched, unmoved by beauty, passion, human need.

I think it is legitimate to ask if we really value children in this society. Oh, we fawn over them a lot. After watching more television in the last month than during my whole life, it appears to me that next to sex, babies and children are the hottest item on Madison Avenue. They are used shamelessly to sell everything - exploited - used to hawk tires, film and hamburgers. But, in point of fact, programs for children in education, health care, nutrition, family services are virtually impossible to fund because we will not pay for them. And while a political campaign tiptoes around issues that matter, a bill that would actually have helped children and families died in Congress two weeks ago.

Before we get too sentimental about children in this society, we need to be honest about the appalling fact that in the wealthiest country in the world there are between 750,000 and 2.5 million homeless people - 100,000 of whom are little children. Can you imagine the possibilities for those children as they grow up? Before we become too sentimental about children we need to know that the Tutoring Program of this church, for the first time, sends a bus to Cabrini-Greene because there are so many handguns and so much violence. Parents who care about their children aren't going to allow them to walk anywhere. I think it is urgent for people who care about the future - people, that is, who care about the children (who, after all, are the future), people of all political persuasions - to acknowledge that many of our children are in crisis. They need us. We must do better than we have done recently.

"Become like children," he said. What do children know that we don't know, or perhaps once knew but have forgotten?

It was helpful for me to be reminded, as I looked at this familiar passage, that Jesus is talking to his disciples when he says, "unless you become like children you won't enter the kingdom of God." He says that to them as they are working very hard at being disciples. Working hard, turning away noisy, clamoring people and protecting their Lord. The sense of it is that his disciples were missing something. In fact, there was something about their trying so hard to be good disciples that caused them to miss it. Namely the incredible, unspeakably good news that God is love, you can trust God to be good; and that God's son, Jesus, is available and accessible always.

And that, I would propose, is the word here for us. The basic and first lesson of our own infancy is trust. If we had loving parents or parent, we learned immediately that we could trust; our needs would be met, our hunger would be fed. We came to a very early conclusion that it's all right to trust and that the world is a trustworthy place by and large. If that doesn't happen, if there is not enough holding and fondling and stimulation, our ability to trust is seriously impaired and so is our spirit. [James Fowler, Stages of Faith, p. 119,120]

Fortunately, for most of us it happened. As we grew up, we learned to be a little wary perhaps. As we stumbled and fell, were disappointed and hurt, we hid that ability to trust rather thoroughly. As we grew we learned that it is our own effort, our abilities, our strength that will carry us through. And so we try hard, work hard - even at our religion.

What children know that we may have forgotten is that they are loved unconditionally, for who they are; not for what they produce, not for their performance of duty, but simply for who they are.

There is a child somewhere inside you that remembers that, regardless of who you are - business executive, broker, physician, nurse, corporate attorney, homemaker, teacher, parent, student.

There is a child in you that remembers how to experience wonder.

There is a part of you that knows how to receive gifts you haven't earned.

There is a child in you that wants and needs the love of a parent. You may have tried to convince yourself otherwise. You may have equated maturity with not needing that. But it's not true.

There is a child in you that remembers how to trust for your ultimate safety and security.

The good news of the Gospel of Christ is that God may be trusted.

The gracious invitation of Jesus Christ to them, to you and me, to all of us, is to trust God with our security, our future, our salvation.

"Become like children," he said.

Amen.